

## UNIT 4: AUXILIARY VERBS & ASPECT

This unit is about the uses of **primary auxiliaries** in English (*be, have, do*), mainly in connection with the **progressive aspect** and **perfect aspect**. It is important to note that ‘aspect’ is not the same as ‘tense’. It does not relate to present or past time as such, but to how an event is viewed – whether as something on-going and incomplete (progressive aspect), or something completed (perfect aspect). The time itself may be present or past – present as in (1-2), where the first verb is marked by the present tense:

1. My neighbour **is walking** his dog. (on-going at the present moment)
2. He **has bought** a Jack Russell. (completed before the present moment)

or past, as in (3-4), where the first verb is marked by the past tense:

3. My neighbour **was walking** his dog. (on-going at some point of time in the past)
4. He **had bought** a Jack Russell. (completed before some point of time in the past)

Notice that **tense-marking** is separate from **aspect-marking** – that’s why we can contrast (i) the same tense with different aspects, e.g. *is walking* vs. *has walked*; and (ii) the same aspect with different tenses, e.g. *is walking* vs. *was walking*. The progressive or perfect aspect can combine with either the present or past tense, and vice versa.

The concept of ‘aspect’ is probably easier for you to grasp than ‘tense’, because aspect can also be found in Chinese. In Chinese (Putonghua), progressive aspect is marked by *zai* (在) before the verb, and perfect aspect by *le* (了) after the verb, e.g.

5. *ta zai xi che* (他在洗車)
6. *ta xi le che* (他洗了車)

(You can supply the Cantonese equivalents for the above sentences yourself.) Of course, aspect in English is more complicated than in Chinese, because it is combined with tense, so that you get ‘present + progressive’, ‘past + progressive’, ‘present + perfect’, and ‘past + perfect’. But as long as you try to keep the two things – tense and aspect -- separate in your mind (as we have tried to do in this unit), it shouldn’t be too confusing.

## SUGGESTED ANSWERS

### QUESTION 1:

All the examples in the ‘present progressive’ (2,4,6,8) here are about events or states which are going on at the present moment.

### QUESTION 2:

The present progressive here also indicates events or states which are on-going at present, but in a broad rather than narrow sense, such that the event does not literally have to be going on at this very moment. E.g. in (2), ‘She is writing a book on Leslie Cheung at the moment’, she does not literally have to be writing or typing the book at this very moment (she may well be

shopping or playing tennis right now!) But the idea is that she is currently engaged in writing such a book. The idea of temporariness is central in this use of the progressive aspect.

### QUESTION 3:

Here the progressive aspect is used for planned future events.

### QUESTION 4:

The ungrammatical ones are marked by \*:

1. \* I am knowing five languages.
2. \* He is having a house and a car.
3. \* She is liking classical music.
4. \* This book is belonging to me.
5. \* I am understanding your problem.
6. They are thinking about the problem.

### QUESTION 5:

Broadly speaking, the same types of verbs in Chinese as in English cannot take the progressive aspect, i.e. *zhidao* (知道), *you* (有), *xihuan* (喜歡), *shuyu* (屬於), *mingbai* (明白).

### QUESTION 6:

The verbs in Questions 4 and 5 all refer to stable, long-lasting states. Therefore, they cannot be used with progressive aspect, which implies a temporary state or activity. Note the difference between ‘He lives with his parents’ and ‘He is living with his parents’. The first implies that this is a normal, long-term arrangement, while the second implies that it is temporary.

### QUESTION 7:

All these verbs have at least two senses, one referring to a stable state, and the other to a temporary, bounded activity. Only in the second sense can the verb take progressive aspect, for reasons already explained.

1. \* He is having a sports car. (*have* = ‘own’, a stable state)
2. He is having his dinner. (*have* = ‘eat’, a temporary, bounded activity)
3. \* He is seeing the picture on the wall. (*see* = ‘perceive with the eyes’)
4. The doctor is seeing his patients in the surgery. (*see* = ‘treat patients’)
5. \* This book is costing \$100. (*cost* = ‘has the price of’)
6. I must resign from the club. It is costing me too much. (*cost* = ‘make me pay’)

### QUESTION 8:

The past progressive indicates that an activity (e.g. he was having a shower in (1)) was going on at some point of time in the past (e.g. the time when I rang).

### QUESTION 9:

You may have your own explanations for these mistakes. One possibility is that the writer is using the auxiliary *be* (*am, is, are, was, were*) totally unnecessarily. But there is another possibility. Perhaps the writer is trying to give more emphasis to the sentence by using *be*. If so, he is probably using *be* like the Chinese *shi* (是) (or Cantonese ‘係’), where ‘我是(係) 同意你的意見’ is more emphatic than ‘I agree with you’. But in English, the proper

auxiliary to use for emphasis is not *be*, but *do*: ‘I do agree with you’ and ‘I do strongly recommend this book’. But even then, don’t use *do* for emphasis too much. Another possible error is to use the past tense form of *be* (*was/were*) to ‘double-mark’ the past tense of the main verb, which is totally unnecessary, as in \* ‘We were asked 30 chief executives’.

#### QUESTION 10:

In all these sentences, where the present perfect is used for an event (e.g. ‘have eaten two pizzas’), we’re viewing the event from the end point, when it is already completed.

#### QUESTION 11:

In all these examples, something did not just happen in the past. Rather, some event (e.g. the plane leaving) happened before some other mentioned time or event in the past (e.g. the time I arrived). The use of the past perfect (e.g. ‘the plane **had left**’) shows that the earlier event happened before the later event (‘the time I **arrived**’).

#### QUESTION 12:

The sentences where the past perfect is wrongly used are 1a and 2b. In these examples, something just happened in the past, without any indication that it happened before something else; in fact, the time when it happened is even mentioned (‘yesterday’ or ‘August 1945’). In such cases, just use the simple past tense instead of the past perfect.

#### QUESTION 13

1. After more than 150 years of colonial rule, Hong Kong reverted to China on July 1, 1997. By that time, it **had grown** from a barren rock to one of the most modern and prosperous cities in the world, and the population **had increased** from a few hundred to six million. After 1997, many of the people who **had migrated** (migrate) overseas earlier **began** (begin) to return, as they **had found** that things were not so bad after all.
2. Recently, I returned to my old neighbourhood to look for my childhood friend. I found that she **had moved** out long ago. Some neighbours told me that she **had married** a rich old man from America, and others that she **had joined** the sisterhood and **gone** to serve in India. Someone even said that she **had died**. I hope that I can find her again some day.

#### QUESTION 14

These examples show one of the differences between the past tense and the present perfect. The past tense, but not the present perfect, should be used if the time of occurrence (e.g. ‘1900’, ‘2 minutes ago’) is given. The present perfect, but not the past tense, should be used if a period of time extending from the past to the present (e.g. ‘since 1989’, ‘until now’) is mentioned.

#### QUESTION 15

In the following contexts, sentences 1, 3, 5, 7, which use the present perfect, are more appropriate than the ones using the past tense: [NB. Sentences marked with a ‘?’ are less appropriate.]

1. A: Can we start the party now? B: Sure, my parents have left.
2. ? A: Can we start the party now? B: Sure, my parents left.
3. The guests have arrived. Bring out the food.

4. ? The guests arrived. Bring out the food.
5. A: Would you like to join us for dinner? B: No thank you, I have eaten.
6. ? A: Would you like to join us for dinner? B: No thank you, I ate.
7. Can you give me a lift home? The last bus has left.
8. ? Can you give me a lift home? The last bus left.

The reason is that the present perfect implies relevance to the present. And in all the above cases, the part which is in the present perfect is very relevant to the context (e.g. because my parents have left, we can start the party now).

### QUESTION 16

The verb in the present perfect (e.g. 'have written a novel') implies completion. So sentence (1) implies that the novel is finished. The verb in the present perfect progressive (e.g. 'have been writing a novel') implies that the event has been going on for some time up to the present, but is not necessarily finished.

### QUESTION 17

When a main verb (e.g. *know*) is used without an auxiliary (like *be*, *have*, *will*, etc.), then the 'dummy' auxiliary *do* is needed if we turn the sentence into a question (e.g. 'Do you know...?', 'Why did he climb...?'), or a negative ('I do not know...').

### ADDITIONAL EXERCISES:

#### Text 1:

Global economic growth **is taking** its toll on the environment, and Hong Kong's pollution is certainly the worst I **have seen**. The warning bells **have rung** and the air pollution index (API) readings keep increasing in Hong Kong. Strict policies and fines **have been put** in place, and it is well-known that the removal of lead from petrol and the use of energy-efficient technology can also greatly reduce the problems. But why **hasn't** the situation **improved**? Can't the government do more to fight pollution?

It may be our fault. Many environmental measures **have been set**, but only a few people support them. How can the air improve without our support?

The government should strictly punish people who throw rubbish on the streets or in the sea. Industries which **are polluting** our rivers and oceans must be hit with heavy fines.

#### Text 2:

Under Article 23 of the Basic Law, Hong Kong is required to pass laws against acts of treason, secession, sedition, subversion and the theft of state secrets.

There **have** long **been** concerns that the laws will restrict freedoms and be used to clamp down on dissent.

Officials both in Hong Kong and on the mainland **have sought** to play down the fears, while insisting that the time **has come** for the national security laws to be enacted. The government is expected to release a consultation paper soon, perhaps as early as next month.

#### Text 3:

Since the downfall of former strongman Suharto in 1998, restrictions on Chinese culture **have begun** to lift.

Last year, President Megawati **declared** Lunar New Year or *Imlek* as a national holiday, making it the first time that Chinese culture **had been recognised** officially since the 1965 ban.

Since 1999, Chinese Indonesians **have celebrated** *Imlek* openly, shopping malls **have been decked** out in red and gold lanterns every New Year, several Chinese-language newspapers **have hit** the streets, and Metro television station broadcasts the news several times a day in Putonghua.

But Hendrawan says, in practice, that many of the old laws discriminating against ethnic Chinese **are** still **operating**. Along with 100 other ethnic Chinese professionals, he **was meeting** the president's husband, Taufiq Kiemas, last night, to demand equal rights for Chinese-Indonesians.